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In the age of dwindling resources and an ever decreasing pool of high school graduates an institutionally orchestrated student retention program can be one of the most effective survival strategies. In addition to the obvious benefit of holding more students to graduation, a campus-wide retention effort can bring about institutional renewal and lay the foundation for long-range strategic planning. The role of the institutional researcher is central to the success of the retention effort itself and to the other activities flowing naturally from it. This paper suggests how the researcher might come to better understand the what, when, who, and why of dropping out and what opportunities arise from this data for institutional renewal. (Author)

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The Role of Institutional Research in Student
Retention and Campus Renewal

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In the age of dwindling resources and an ever decreasing pool of high school graduates an institutionally orchestrated student retention program can be one of the most effective survival strategies. In addition to the obvious benefit of holding more students to graduation, a campus wide retention effort can bring about institutional renewal and lay the foundation for long-range strategic planning. The role of the institutional researcher is central to the success of the retention effort itself and to the other activities flowing naturally from it. The institutional researcher can identify the number and types of students leaving the college, inform the campus community about important studies found in the abundant literature on college student attrition, help devise intrusive retention strategies and design research projects to evaluate their effectiveness, and assist in developing a consensus for defining the institution's mission and long-range plans.

WHY RETENTION IS IMPORTANT

There are few who work in the administration of a college who have or could have a better view of the attrition problem at their own institution than those employed in the office of institutional research. The researcher may have been supplying this data to policy-makers on a routine basis for years and observed, as a response to unacceptably high attrition, more

concentrated recruitment and marketing techniques. In the main, entrenched managers of colleges or corporations will find it difficult to conduct a systematic self-examination because it will be their decisions that may be found to have been misguided. Thus, the natural response will be to ignore or pay cursory attention to the researcher who calls for an internal self-evaluation of the institution as a way to address the attrition problem.

Depending on the type of institution, freshmen attrition alone can range from 45% at community colleges to 27% at four-year private colleges (Beal and Noel, 1980). A case can easily be made, from the researcher's point of view, that the cost of recruiting students to replace those already enrolled are not likely to be as high in the long run as those incurred to keep them. In other words, it can be shown that in addition to the obvious relationship between attrition and enrollment there is a significant drain on institutional resources to prospect for new students. Supporting this view are notable authorities such as Alexander Astin who says, "While administrators and faculty have traditionally seen recruitment as a principle means to keeping enrollment up, an equally promising approach is to reduce dropout rates...investing resources to prevent dropping out may be more "cost effective" than applying the same resources to more vigorous recruitment." (Astin 1975, p.2) This point can be made even more dramatically when the researcher projects the number of high school students from feeder institutions who will graduate in the next ten years. Nationally, the decline in high school graduates will reach 20% by 1995 and in an industrialized northeastern state such as Massachusetts the "bottom will fall out" with a decline of 42%. (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1982)

The institutional researcher can make an even more dramatic case by distributing information about the number and types of colleges that have closed in the last 20 years. Between 1960 and 1981 a total of 236 schools closed: 91 private two-year, 35 public two-year, 109 private four-year, and one public four-year college.(NCES, 1983) If those in key decision-making positions are not convinced that it may be well worth the pain of introspection to address the retention problem, then the institutional researcher may wish to provide an analysis of the encroachment of competitors in markets traditionally reserved for their institution. Within a ten-year period Massasoit Community College in southeastern Massachusetts found itself directly competing for students with two private junior colleges, three public community colleges, two state and one private four-year school, and two public universities; not to mention all the public and private institutions of higher education in Boston. The case can be made, especially at institutions vulnerable to competitors, that sound retention strategies may be more cost effective than recruitment strategies and point the way to better resource allocation.

For those who work with data and make informed trend projections in the office of institutional research, there is another responsibility. This responsibility of the researcher is to call into question, should the data indicate, the moral obligation of an educational institution to students highly prone to dropping out. To the extent that certain attrition behaviors are within the capacity of a college to correct, there is an obligation to change aspects of an institution's environment which operate to discourage learning and persistence. Essentially, the researcher asks the basic questions:

What is a dropout?

Who drops out?

When do they drop out?

Why do they drop out?

What can the institution do to prevent students from dropping out
as much as they do?

Finding answers to these questions will take the researcher to the very heart of the college enterprise - student development. Professionally and politically there is no capital to be made by undertaking this task without widespread, top to bottom, support; that is, if action leading to improvement is the goal. The best first step in a retention plan is most likely to be identifying and categorizing the subjects of a potential study.

THE WHAT, WHEN, WHO, AND WHY OF DROPPING OUT

In order to identify dropout behavior it is important to reach clarity with respect to both definitions and the range of dropout behavior to be studied. Although universally accepted definitions are not available, the literature on attrition suggests the following (Lenning, Beal, Sauer, 1980):

Persister - a student enrolled without interruption and who graduates within three years with an A.A. degree or within five years with a B.A. degree.

Stopout - a student who leaves and then returns to graduate from the same college.

Dropout - a student who leaves a college never to return.

Retention - when a student completes or continues formal study at the institution in which he/she originally enrolled.

Attrition - when a student is no longer enrolled.

Employing these definitions or a variation of them will direct the researcher in tracking the progress of individuals through the institution. Attempts to work with aggregate data based on sheer numbers not returning or withdrawing will prove to be misleading. Each student must be followed in his/her path through the collegiate environment.

Much can be learned during a preliminary scanning of dropout data, if the time of the dropout's departure is established. The effort to establish when students leave will provide clues for corrective measures. The categories in the following list help to identify these points of departure:

Admitted, never registered

Registered, no show

Stopped attending classes

Officially withdrew

Didn't register for subsequent term

Didn't register after X terms

Was academically dismissed

Once an operational definition is determined and the "time of departure" parameters set, the institution needs to know if there are any common characteristics shared by the persisters and by the non-persisters. The researcher has the task of developing a profile of the dropout-prone. There are ample studies on this subject. One of the most notable is the one reported by Alexander Astin in Preventing Students from Dropping Out. Here and in other research reviewed by Cope and Hannah (1975); Lenning, Beal, and Sauer (1980); Pantages and Creedon (1978), Ramist (1981), the researcher is well advised to concentrate on factors seen in the past to contribute to the profile of a dropout:

Demographic Factors Related to Attrition

- Low level of parental education
- Economically disadvantaged
- Hispanic
- Graduate from small rural high school
- Graduate of public high school

Academic Factors Related to Attrition

- Poor high school grades
- Low rank in high school class
- Low academic aptitude
- High school rated low
- Poor study habits

Motivational Factors Related to Attrition

No advanced degree aspirations

Dissimilar beliefs and attitudes compared to those of peer group

Unclear vocational aspirations

Unwilling to endure dissatisfaction

Wish to transfer at time of entrance

The "when" and "who" of the attrition issue need not be closely connected with a theoretical model. Investigators seeking to answer the question, "Why do students dropout?" must, however, contend with theoretical considerations to guide the development of a conceptual model out of which certain data rather than others are collected. An example of such a structural model is suggested by Aitken (1982). The model is a representation of the congruency theory of persistence proposed by Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975). Simply stated the theory predicts that students will persist if they are successfully integrated into the intellectual and social systems of the college. Aitken builds a simple model (1) from this theory:

$$(1) \text{ Retention} = \text{Academic Integration} + \text{Social Integration} + \text{Random Error}$$

alternatively stated:

$$(2) \text{ Attrition} = \text{Academic Incongruity} + \text{Social Incongruity} + \text{Random Error}$$

The search for an answer to, "Why do students dropout?" involves a decision about which proxy variables will best serve to substitute for the abstract theoretical variables of academic and social integration or

incongruity. Empirically measurable proxy variables may then be selected within this theoretical context. Some variables to consider are:

Academic Integration Measures

Number of courses attempted vs. number of courses completed

First semester freshmen GPA

Participation in Honors Program

Student evaluation of academic environment (survey)

Social Integration Measures

Residence hall satisfaction (survey)

Extracurricular participation (survey)

Social interaction with faculty (survey)

After tracking individual students and determining who they are, when they dropout, and why they leave according to a theoretical model, the institutional researcher is ready to plant the seeds for the next phase of what could be a promising campus-wide retention effort. Once the data is collected and interpreted by the researcher, the critical step is to have someone take the findings seriously enough to launch an honest institutional self-study. The evidence, however, must be compelling!

INSTITUTIONAL SELF-STUDY AND RENEWAL

If the evidence is overwhelmingly indicative of a college in need of self-examination and redirection, then the researcher must be able to help manage the mood for change. The potential exists to destroy efforts at

institutional renewal before they are ever launched simply by the careless use of language in rendering a report to policy-makers on student attrition. Bare facts in the hands of insecure administrators may lead to an outbreak of acrimony in which research findings are employed to isolate and accuse certain members of the college community that it is they who are responsible for the high dropout rate. The researcher in writing an attrition report must be mindful of how this sensitive data could be used to draw battle lines rather than open the lines of communication. If the focus of attention is too narrow, if the problems identified are reported as unidimensional and the obvious responsibility of a small group, then it is unlikely that the broadly based campus support required for searching introspection will ever come about. Increasing student persistence must be seen to be everyone's business and everyone must be shown that they have a stake in the solutions.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, improvement in the learning and social environment of a college and better college services for students are probably the best hedges against the problem of attrition. When and to what extent these improvements ought to take place in the career of a student is not within the sole purview of the institutional researcher. The role of the institutional researcher in promoting meaningful change is one of a catalyst. Breaking the bad news about a serious retention problem has the potential for promoting fruitful dialogue which cuts across divisional lines and vertical stratifications; but it all depends on the skill of the messenger.

Mobilizing a campus community to look at itself through what it does to students in their comings and goings engenders sober reflection. From this turn inward can spring a renewed sense of mission and produce the enthusiasm necessary to bring about coordinated plans and well orchestrated actions.

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